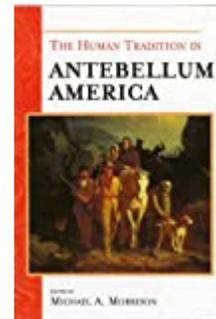


H-Net Reviews

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Michael A. Morrison, ed. *The Human Tradition in Antebellum America*. The Human Tradition in America Series. Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2000. xxiv + 251 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8420-2835-6.



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Diverse Lives in Antebellum America

What is the American identity? How did it develop and change over time? Such deceptively simple questions have no easy answers. The essays in this volume, seventh in the Human Tradition in America Series, demonstrate the diversity and complexity of experiences and identities of individuals in the antebellum era. Editor Michael A. Morrison has collected fifteen minibiographies of a diverse group of antebellum Americans, and he provides a useful, gracefully written introduction to the book, and to the individual essays, which summarizes the major themes and interpretative issues raised by the lives of these lesser-known individuals.

These essays present a type of “new biography” which portray the lived experiences of ordinary individuals, is informed by social and cultural history, and considers large social, economic, and political forces as well as the agency of individuals. As Morrison notes, these biographies offer revealing insights on gender issues, working-class experiences, race, and local economic change and its effect on society and politics” (p. xiv). Thus, diverse and complex as these lived experiences are, the book is unified by themes such as the market revolution, the shift from deferential, republican politics to a more democratic society, westward expansion, the roles of race, class, and gender, and the permeable

boundaries between public and private. The biographies reveal “the contradictions and tensions between the ideological premises of that political culture and the real experiences of individuals who were ignored, marginalized, or oppressed by the majority” (p. xxiii). Thus, the national identity could be, and often was, at odds with the experiences of individual Americans.

The essays are organized chronologically and thematically. Each author provides a list of “suggested readings,” which will be valuable to readers interested in further exploring the topics and interpretative issues raised by the authors. Taken together, they demonstrate how narrative biography and historical analysis may be combined.

The first two minibiographies discuss the democratization of politics and of religion, respectively. Stephen Grossbart’s essay on Abraham Bishop, a Republican orator and politician, combines biography with political history, analyzing the complex relationships among local and national politics and between Bishop’s personal life and political career. Although he had difficulty establishing himself as a lawyer, Bishop was a talented public speaker who began his political activity as an antifederalist orator. During the early national period, he advocated educational reform (he had a particular interest in “Female Education”) and the “Rights of Black Men.” With the exhortation “[l]et us be consistent Americans,” he ar-

gued that “[t]he blacks are entitled to freedom, for we did not say that all *white* men are free, but *all men* are free” (p. 7; emphasis in original). Not surprisingly, he was the target of vehement criticism by Federalists, who alleged that Bishop’s unhappy marriage and subsequent divorce constituted immorality. For five years, Bishop fell silent. Then, as now, personal attack and political criticism were closely associated.

The election of 1800 “offered Bishop an opportunity for a new political career: party politician” (p. 9). As his talent for political organization became evident when he organized Republican festivals, Bishop could “mediate between state and national political leaders and the common folk whose votes were sought” (p. 3). His appeals to mechanics and religious dissenters were especially effective. In an intermediate stage between deferential and democratic politics, Bishop helped to build a strong party organization in Connecticut, and these political practices spread throughout the nation. Thus a local “party manager and political middleman” (p. 13), rather than a national political leader, developed the popular tactics usually associated with the Jacksonian “era of the common man.”

While Grossbart provides a bibliographical case study of the democratization of politics in the early republic, Ruth Alden Doan discusses the life of John Wesley Young, whose career as an itinerant Methodist preacher in Virginia and North Carolina lasted an incredible fifty years. Placing Young’s life in its historical and social context, she provides a brief but thorough summary of the theology and development of Methodism and how the democratic ideology of the American Revolution fostered religious freedom and the growth of the movement. Using Young’s autobiography and journal entries, Doan explores the inner and outer world of a man who, after undergoing the conversion experience and joining the Methodists, received the “call to preach,” experiencing the devil and God as directly communicating with him. Because he had a family, Young could live a more settled life than most circuit riders.

However, for Young there was considerable disparity between “the promise of spiritual community” (p. 26) and the reality. Indeed, Methodism was rife with internal tensions. As a slaveholder in a religion that emphasized spiritual equality and had biracial congregations, Young felt alienated from both African-Americans and whites who disapproved of what they considered his too close associations with blacks. As Methodism grew from a sect into a denomination, emphasizing bourgeois re-

spectability, Young encountered unresponsive congregations and other Methodists who did not share his emphasis on “holiness.” Doan documents how “[m]uch of his experience was one of alienation: alienation from the wider society that did not accept the faith and discipline of Methodism; alienation from the changes that he perceived within the Methodist community; and ultimately alienation from his own body and self” (p. 27).

Several essays focus on individuals and their relationship to the market revolution. By demonstrating how individuals responded very differently to capitalism, the authors provide nuanced interpretations of the “transition to capitalism” debate. In his study of James Trotter and his sons, Craig Thompson Friend demonstrates that for some merchants, older republican ideals of community, moral economy, and mutual obligations coexisted with, and placed constraints upon, the self-interested pursuit of individual gain. Trotter and his family migrated to Kentucky, where he established a business, which his sons “transformed...from a local store into the center of a commercial empire” (p. 35). Effectively combining biography with economic and social history, Friend discusses how frontier merchants established intricate trade networks, developing a western economic sphere connected to the east more by debt than by the need to import manufactured goods. Members of the “backcountry elite” such as Trotter and his sons “provided a cultural bridge between the two worlds” of Virginia and frontier culture (p. 38).

Friend makes the important point that “early Kentuckians assumed men of commerce would act as economic patriarchs over households whose members became bound to mercantiles through networks of trade and barter” (p. 40). Although the Trotters’s relationships with their eastern suppliers were impersonal, they were aware that in the backcountry, “trade implied reciprocity,” and acted accordingly: “[a] successful merchant like Trotter was one who blended his own profit orientation with an attentiveness to moral accountability” (p. 40). Ostensibly exemplifying the emerging ideal of the self-made man, Trotter and his sons were, in reality, very much part of community networks. Friend’s concept of merchants as “economic patriarchs” is suggestive, implying that the ideal of benevolent household patriarchy existed in the economic, as well as domestic, sphere.

While Friend demonstrates that frontier capitalists retained, used, and were restrained by the traditional moral economy, Gary J. Kornblith discusses the inner tensions and ambivalence of Hiram Hill, who at least on

the surface, was the quintessential self-made man. Using Hill's diary, Kornblith describes Hill's progress from mill worker to apprentice, journeyman, and master carpenter, his growing success, and how an unfortunate accident led Hill to abandon carpentry for an even more lucrative career as a lumber merchant. After achieving financial and social success, Hill married and became involved in a controversy over suffrage requirements in the Rhode Island constitution, and even required his workers to share his politics.

Kornblith documents how "behind the facade of bourgeois success, Hill felt deep ambivalence about his constant pursuit of material gain" (p. 61). Hill suffered pangs of guilt over selling some family property, an act which exemplified his "conflict between the pursuit of wealth and loyalty to family identity" (p. 62). After the deaths of his mother, sister, and especially his wife, Hill deeply regretted not spending more time with his family, instead of selfishly chasing profits. Admitting that Hill was not a representative figure, Kornblith argues that Hill's ambivalence about his ambition is still significant, for it demonstrates that the market revolution "triggered struggles within individuals" (p. 63). Hill's experience is relevant for contemporary Americans who, attempting to balance achievement with family, find that financial success may not be synonymous with happiness.

Andrew Cayton analyzes the life of a very different frontier entrepreneur, Senator John Smith, who experienced none of Hill's ambivalence about the pursuit of wealth. Smith's life presents an interesting case study of how "public reputation, private piety, personal profit, and professional politics could scarcely be disentangled from each other" (p. 79). Settling in the Northwest Territory, for a time Smith was a Baptist preacher, but drifted away from the church as commerce was his true calling. Smith prospered through diverse business activities, the most lucrative of which was supplying the United States Army and trading with soldiers. Becoming one of Ohio's first senators, Smith's economic and political activities were mutually reinforcing. By meeting with Aaron Burr, Smith "gambled with the slippery line between public and private interests once too often" (p. 79), was forced to resign from the Senate, and returned to the Baptist fold. For Smith and other merchants, "personal calculation informed national loyalty" (p. 68).

Portraying Smith as an opportunist in a society of equally expedient individuals, Cayton offers a significant revision of Jeffersonian politics on the frontier: Smith and his cohorts "supported a weak national government

only to the extent that it benefitted them; they wanted money with as little regulation as possible" (p. 74). Unlike Kornblith, who clearly sympathizes with the inner torment of Hiram Hill, Cayton is rather critical of his subject, and the aspects of American society and culture that he represents. Perhaps alluding to Benedict Anderson's concept of nations as "imagined communities" [1], Cayton suggests that for Smith and his ilk, the "imagined community was a world of profit and contracts" (p. 70). Smith "positively salivated about the prospects for war" (p. 75) with the Spanish along the Mississippi because it would be good for business. By situating Smith's life in its historical, social, and economic context, Cayton ably demonstrates that Smith was quite typical. Disputing historians such as Charles Sellers, who argue that the transition to capitalism was resisted, Cayton suggests that, for many merchants, the chance to pursue self-interest was eagerly and unambiguously embraced.[2]

Gene Smith's essay on Arsene Lacarriere Latour provides a case study of another politically engaged economic opportunist. A French aristocrat who escaped the French Revolution and slave revolt in Saint Domingue (where his wife's dowry provided an estate), Latour immigrated to the United States, where he pursued a series of careers. As an architect in New Orleans, Latour "moved easily between the established French Creole elite and incoming Anglo-American entrepreneurs" (p. 89). Smith situates Latour in the social and cultural context of the region, where the loyalty of Spanish and French inhabitants to the new nation was tenuous. The War of 1812 provided Latour with further opportunities as a military engineer for Andrew Jackson, and Latour subsequently demonstrated his patriotism by writing a book celebrating the victory at the Battle of New Orleans. Here, Smith effectively combines biography with military history.

Latour's patriotism was not to last, for after the war, he became an agent for the Spanish government: "constant money problems, the uncertain nature of loyalty in this era, and the prospect of adventure and personal gain all played a role in his decision" (p. 96). Although Latour's cultural identity was very different from that of Senator John Smith, for both men loyalty to the new nation was secondary to the possibility of personal advancement.

Samuel J. Watson explores the life of Thomas Sidney Jesup who, in contrast to Latour, remained loyal to the United States government and army. A soldier who became a commander and quartermaster of the army, Jesup

“played a significant role in the professionalization of the army, the institutional development of the U.S. nation-state, and the extension of its borders and sovereignty” (p. 101). Watson describes the progress of Jesup’s career as commander (including his role in Indian removal) and bureaucrat, suggesting that his “values of personal integrity and patriotic duty” (p. 106) were those of a typical career army officer.

As quartermaster, Jesup made significant administrative reforms associated with a modern, efficient, professional army. Emphasizing accountability, uniform standards, and efficiency, Jesup’s reforms were, according to Watson, “almost certainly of more value during the Civil War than the often-vaunted experience gained by future generals in their Mexican battles” (p. 107). Combining social and military history with biography, Watson demonstrates the importance of Jesup’s bureaucratic innovations, which have been neglected by historians. Watson also considers the social and political role of army officers: Jesup, much to his chagrin, could not completely avoid politics. This essay demonstrates how biography combined with social history can offer a revised interpretation of the development and professionalization of the military.

While economic and political opportunities expanded for white men in the early republic, men of color encountered severe constraints. With population growth and westward expansion, the demands of white settlers for removal of the Native American population increased. The story of Andrew Jackson ignoring the Supreme Court and forcing the Cherokees to migrate westward on the Trail of Tears is well known, as is the belief of most whites that Native Americans were “savages.” Two essays examine the life, society, and culture of native American leaders, both of mixed heritage.

Mary Young discusses the life of John Ross, long-time Principal Chief of the Cherokees. Ross presents a good example of the social construction of racial identity: to the matrilineal Cherokees, Ross, who was one-eighth Cherokee, was a member of his mother’s clan and of the tribe, while white Georgians asserted that he was no “real Indian” as a way “to deny his authority as a tribal leader when he proved insufficiently pliant” (p. 116). Thus, assignment of racial identity was instrumental, a way for dominant groups to maintain power: the same whites who claimed that an individual with a remote African ancestor was black denied that Ross was Indian. Young discusses how Ross, and other young men of mixed heritage, bridged the white and Indian worlds, adopting as-

pects of white “civilization,” such as Christianity, written language, and law, including the Cherokee constitution.

Not all Cherokees agreed with Ross and his strategies. Some Cherokees disapproved of the constitution because they believed it undermined traditional ways of life. When the Indian Removal Act was passed, Young notes that the government used a divide-and-conquer strategy with the Cherokees: members of a Treaty Party (who were not elected by the Cherokees) negotiated with the government while Ross resisted removal. Once in Oklahoma territory, internal divisions appeared among the Old Settlers, Treaty Party, and Ross and his group; however, attempts to divide the Cherokee Nation were unsuccessful. After the Civil War, nearing the end of his life, Ross was still working to maintain Cherokee sovereignty. All his life, Ross acted on the belief that race was “irrelevant to culture and accomplishment” (p. 118).

Like John Ross, Peter Pitchlynn, the son of a white trader and a Choctaw woman, experienced the flexibility and constraints of a bicultural identity. Donna Akers analyzes Pitchlynn’s “syncretic identity” as Choctaw and Euro-American, and how although he “functioned successfully in both worlds...at times he felt unwanted in either world” (pp. 132-33). She discusses Pitchlynn’s unsuccessful fight against a treaty that forced Choctaws to migrate, and the disastrous effects of removal. One of the strengths of this essay is how Akers analyzes the cultural differences between European and Native Americans: for the Choctaws, land was not a commodity, but rather communal, sacred ground where the spirits of the dead remained. She also discusses Pitchlynn’s slaveholding in depth, explaining how, unlike American slavery, Choctaw slaves were war captives who were usually “adopted by a clan, at which point they became Choctaw;” Pitchlynn’s slaves were treated “more like servants” (p. 139).

Akers alludes to the social construction of racial identity, and examines the effects of racism. After removal, Pitchlynn realized that “no matter how ‘white’ Indians became, they would never be accepted fully as Americans” (p. 138). Yet he was very active politically, traveling to Washington to represent the Choctaws, and attempting to retain his people’s sovereignty and independence. He was drawn into cultural conflict on a more personal level when his sons were charged with assaulting a white man. Their uncles, who successfully obtained a presidential pardon, wrote that they “are themselves *almost white men*” [emphasis in original], an incident which illustrates how “a system of racism informed the

administration of justice in the United States” (p. 141). Such an observation is all too pertinent today.

Historians have long discussed how during the antebellum “era of the common man,” African American men were marginalized and disenfranchised. George R. Price examines the life and thought of Hosea Easton, a black abolitionist who has been neglected by historians. Since the era of the American Revolution, African Americans had noted the inconsistency between the ideology of freedom and equality and the practice of slavery. Some blacks also protested racism itself: in 1800, in what may be one of the earliest sit-ins, Easton’s parents purchased and sat in a whites-only pew in two segregated Massachusetts churches. His father also established a factory with a school; unfortunately both were forced to close. Through activity in the National Convention of Free People of Color and writing treatises on slavery and racism, Easton continued the family tradition. His perspectives were remarkably prescient. He addressed the economics of slavery, arguing that “the whole system is founded on avarice” (p. 154), explained the connection between slavery in the south and racism in the north, discussed the danger slavery inflicted on whites by endangering their souls, argued that slavery was so damaging and degrading that whites were responsible for remedying its effects, and even presented an Afrocentric, environmentalist view of human history. As editor Morrison notes, Easton anticipated later arguments by W. E. B. DuBois.

Price thus demonstrates the diversity and complexity in early African-American abolitionist thought, noting that former slaves would have found his interpretation of the psychological damage of slavery (which anticipates Stanley Elkins [3]), “unsettling at best, and offensive at worst” (p. 157). Indeed, along with Easton’s early death, the prominence of former slaves like Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth contributed to Easton’s neglect by historians.

Like men of color, white women were marginalized in antebellum society. Three of the essays provide biographies of women who experienced and responded to the constraints of their gender in different ways. Historians have long discussed the nineteenth-century ideology of domesticity, and more recently, have criticized the paradigm of separate spheres, arguing that the boundaries between public and private were permeable. The ideal of companionate marriage accompanied revised gender roles; however, for many women, the reality of marriage was quite different.

Anya Jabour tells the tragic story of Laura Wirt Ran-

dall, whose life demonstrates the constraints upon a well-educated, middle-class antebellum woman who was expected to fulfill the “proper” domestic role of wife and mother. Using Laura’s often poignant letters to her parents and cousin, Jabour effectively brings her story to life. Laura’s father, a Virginia merchant and slaveholder, provided his intelligent and articulate daughter with a fine education, intending for her to become a “classical scholar” (p. 167). Yet he expected her to “have her education by the time she is sixteen,” when she would be expected to “enter the world” and marry.

Laura, on the other hand, delayed and tried to avoid marriage, believing herself unsuited for a life of domesticity: she referred to household chores as “disagreeable occupations,” feared the dangers of childbirth (perhaps presciently; she died after the birth of her fourth child), and hoped to “live and die in single blessedness” (pp. 169-70). However, lacking alternatives and desiring her parents’ approval, she married. Heartbroken because the couple moved to Florida and she would never see her family again, and trapped in an unhappy marriage to a man who called her “the most miserable, good-for-nothing woman he ever saw” (p. 177), Laura resigned herself to her fate. Although the ideal of “republican motherhood” [4] opened the door to education for middle-class women, Laura had few choices.

While Jabour recovers the life a “private” woman, two other essays examine the very public lives of women who were involved with controversy and scandal. Examining the life of Rebecca Reed, author of the anti-Catholic tract *Six Months in a Convent*, Daniel A. Cohen analyzes the complex interrelationships among gender norms, social class antagonisms, and religious conflict. In 1834, the Ursuline convent in Charlestown, Massachusetts, was burned by a working-class Protestant mob, who justified their actions as a defense of “true womanhood.” Reed, a Protestant convert to Catholicism who had entered the convent and became disillusioned, was blamed for spreading scandalous allegations which contributed to the riot. Her life demonstrates that “the line between ‘public’ and ‘private’ spheres...was a permeable boundary” (p. 193).

In a fine piece of historical detection, Cohen examines the divergent accounts by Reed and the convent superiors of why she entered the convent: Reed maintained that she was a victim of Catholic seduction, while the superiors stated that she wanted to obtain an education and escape a lifetime of domestic service. As the daughter of an impoverished farmer in an industrializing commu-

nity, Reed had few other options to fulfill her aspirations for gentility, and in antebellum America convents offered women an unusual level of independence. Although Cohen does not minimize the importance of religious beliefs and practices, one of his most important contributions is the idea of an antebellum “spiritual economy” in which Reed and others “could seize upon and manipulate religious affiliation as an instrument of personal fulfillment and upward mobility” (p. 193). Social class relations and gender ideology, as well as religious difference, are keys to understanding the convent arson and the life of Reed.

Like Cohen, John F. Marszalek interprets a well-known woman involved in a famous scandal in new ways. Analyzing the life and times of Margaret Eaton, wife of Andrew Jackson’s secretary of war, Marszalek argues that gender norms were at the center of the controversy. When Margaret married John Henry Eaton, rumors swirled that she had been having an affair with him while her first husband, who later committed suicide, was at sea. When Cabinet wives, notably the wife of Vice President John Calhoun, excluded her because of her “immorality,” Jackson took offense because a similar scandal had previously erupted concerning his late wife. Thus, “[p]olitics and etiquette, the presidency and gender all became intertwined in a manner that put the nation through a crisis of the first magnitude” (p. 200).

Even before she met Eaton, Margaret defied gender norms. Daughter of a boardinghouse and tavernkeeper, Margaret associated with men, even debating politics with them, behavior which hardly conformed to the ideal of private, domestic, virtuous womanhood. Acknowledging that Margaret was “no feminist pioneer,” Marszalek thus places “the interweaving of politics and gender” (p. 210), rather than antagonism between Jackson and Calhoun, at the center of the “Petticoat Affair.” In this case, the personal and social clearly became political.

The last two essays discuss a northerner and a southerner whose lives highlight some of the issues that foreshadowed the Civil War. Daniel Feller discusses the life of Benjamin Tappan, who has attracted much less attention than his more well-known brothers, Lewis and Arthur. Benjamin Tappan had a varied career, as “a jurist, a promoter of science, a politician, and finally, a U.S. Senator” (214). Yet his political and religious views placed him at odds with most people in his native New England, and with his own Federalist family. A thoroughgoing rationalist, for Benjamin Christianity was synonymous with superstition. After migrating to Ohio, he was elected to the state senate, and “wielded great influence

behind the scenes” (p. 218).

Over time, his political affiliation shifted from Jeffersonian to Jacksonian Democrat, briefly to the Free Soil movement, back to the Democrats, and finally, to the new Republican party, which he urged Lewis to join. Although Benjamin was “opposed to slavery, he was no abolitionist,” because he viewed the latter as a Whiggish, evangelical crusade (p. 223). He favored educational reforms, emphasizing the need to know science rather than the classics. His diverse interests and political beliefs, which remained consistent though his party affiliation changed, serve as a window onto years before the Civil War.

In his essay on George Washington Harris, creator of the satirical Sut Lovingood stories, John Mayfield combines biography and literary history with analysis of antebellum Southern culture. Sut, described as a “nat’ral born durn’d fool,” was an incorrigible practical joker, proud of lying and stealing, “anarchic, irreverent, and true to his sense of self” (pp. 230, 241). Harris wrote his comic tales in thick southern dialect, with Sut engaging in activities such as slipping lizards in the pants of a hypocritical preacher. In one notable story, by having Sut’s father act like a horse, Harris “created a comic masterpiece from...a father’s total humiliation” (p. 235). Through the Sut stories, Harris satirized many aspects of southern culture: religion, virginity, marriage, manhood and honor, always ridiculing the pretensions of planters to cultural superiority.

Yet Harris was a devout Presbyterian and staunch southern secessionist. To explain how Harris, a product and example of southern culture, could create such tales, Mayfield analyzes the paradoxes of Harris’s life. He was very much the product of east Tennessee, a unionist area of the south area where two “essentially antagonistic” styles existed: the “work ethic of the urban middle class,” and the “leisured world of the gentleman planter” (p. 237). Harris himself embodied this contradiction, for although he worked at a variety of urban occupations, and was part of the urban middle class, he also aspired to the life of the planter. He “was neither a fully independent townsman nor a slaveholder; he tried to be both” (p. 238). Only one who was well acquainted with southern culture could have ridiculed its ideals so effectively and humorously.

These essays would be suitable reading for advanced undergraduates. All are well-written and engaging, and illustrate important historiographical debates about the democratization of politics, the transition to capitalism,

westward expansion, social class identity, the marginalization of minorities, and gender ideology in a way that may be more interesting and accessible to students than reading a monograph. Morrison's excellent introductions, and the authors' lists of "suggested readings" greatly enhance the usefulness of the collection. These minibiographies of a diverse group of individuals highlight the complexity of American experiences during the antebellum era. Unfortunately, some of the authors do not explore the implications of their findings in great depth; however, such a weakness is unavoidable given the length restrictions in a collection of essays. (Some of the authors have produced, or are in the process of writing, larger works on their subjects.) All of the essays are fine examples of how biography has moved beyond the lives of famous men to include other, lesser known, but more representative individuals. Informed by social, cultural, political, economic, and intellectual history, these essays suggest the promises the new biog-

raphy not only for rescuing significant but little-known individuals from oblivion, and illustrating important historical themes, but also for offering new interpretations and ideas.

Notes

[1]. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991).

[2]. Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[3]. Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (University of Chicago, 1976).

[4]. Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

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